Report on COIA to Northwestern University Faculty Senate

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Introduction:

Faculty Senate President Stephen Eisenman and I attended the Annual Meeting of the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics (COIA), held the weekend of February 20-22 in San Diego; approximately 42 of the 63 member schools were represented at this meeting. This report reviews some background on COIA: what it is, how and why it was founded, where it is today, and its plans for the immediate future. I conclude with a couple of observations and recommendations.

From its website, COIA identifies itself as:

. . . an alliance of faculty senates from NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) schools. COIA’s mission is to provide a national faculty voice on intercollegiate sports issues. Areas of concern include academic integrity and quality, student-athlete welfare, campus governance of intercollegiate athletics, commercialization, and fiscal responsibility. The Coalition is committed to the development of effective strategies and proposals for significant, long-term reform in college athletics. COIA works with university faculties, administrations, trustee boards, and national associations concerned with higher education, to implement these strategies and proposals.  
(http://sites.comm.psu.edu/thecoia)

Purpose:

From the Coalition on Intercollege Athletics’ Charter

The Coalition’s purpose is to articulate a broad national faculty voice in support of reform efforts, to contribute ideas towards a successful long-term strategy for reform, and to work with other groups committed to ensuring that athletics enhances rather than undermines the academic mission. The expectation at the outset is for an initial period of several years of high Coalition activity, leading towards adoption of an acceptable comprehensive program of staged reform by the NCAA or by some alternative emerging structure, followed by a diminishing role tracking the success of the adopted program.

History:

COIA was founded in 2002 out of a growing concern among PAC 10 and Big Ten faculty senate presidents about the need for reform of intercollegiate athletics, specifically
Division 1A schools with football programs eligible for post-season bowl games. These faculty senate presidents wanted to ensure that the faculty has a place at the table in discussions regarding academic integrity, student welfare, commercialization of intercollegiate sports, cost of these sports, and competitive equity. Furthermore, they recognized that faculty senates would have a stronger voice in these discussions if they spoke as cohesive national alliance of faculty senates.

Since its inception, COIA’s influence seems to have ebbed and flowed, depending on its ability to sustain its efforts and its organization. One of the weaknesses of COIA is that it has no staff and no money. Because COIA is run by a Steering Committee of Volunteers, like most volunteer organization, it is vulnerable to the fragility of depending on volunteers. Some years COIA’s leadership is strong, but then gets burnt-out; other years its leadership is less aggressive and dependable, and the organization and its impact suffer.

Current state:

COIA has had a strong leader in its Steering Committee Chair, Mike Bowen. However, it is apparent that Mike is exhausted and understands that COIA cannot go on under its current structure. While COIA has done quite a bit of work in the past, the general consensus among those in attendance is that COIA voice has recently been marginalized, especially by the NCAA. They hope to change this by updating their recommended Best Practices document, and having each COIA faculty senate take it back to her respective college or university for a faculty senate vote of support and endorsement.

In addition, COIA has been working closely with the Drake Group, a non-profit organization created in 1999 by John Erickson, the then Provost of Drake University. Their objective is to ensure that the trend towards the commercialization of intercollegiate be stemmed and that these institutions and the NCAA work in the best interests of the student-athlete, from the perspective of the student’s academics, health, and general welfare. The Drake Group has been involved in discussion with former Maryland Congressman Tom McMillen, a former All-American and professional basketball player and Rhodes Scholar. McMillen is spearheading a move for a house bill to create a Presidential Commission to “identify and examine issues of national concern related to the conduct of intercollegiate athletics and to make recommendations for the resolutions of the issues, and for other purposes” (H.R. 5743, 2). Should this commission be approved, COIA hopes to be involved, if only at the level of representing faculty concerns.

Future Plans

COIA’s immediate plans fall into two categories: reorganization of the steering committee and producing an updates statement on best practices.
Reorganization:
COIA plans to expand its steering committee from 4 to 7 and formalize their meetings with a monthly virtual meeting. The new structure will have:

- Chair
- Vice-chair
- 3 Committee Chairs, representing each of the three subcommittees (Process, Academic Integrity and Student Welfare)
- 2 at-large members to ensure that all of the six conferences are represented on the Steering Committee

They are also examining incorporating as a non-profit, charging a membership fee, and having a paid staff.

Best Practices:

Although COIA produced a document of recommended Best Practices in 2007, much of it needs updating, due to the rapidly changing state of intercollegiate athletics, especially in the revenue sports of football, men's basketball, and women's basketball.

These revisions have been divided into two major categories: academic integrity and student welfare. Each attendee was assigned to either revise or draft a statement on a different area. Among the issues to be addressed in each are the following

Academic Integrity:
- Admissions standards
- Tracking clustering of student-athletes into specific courses or majors
- Academic advising
- Eligibility
- Practice times conflicting with courses
- Remediation for the students who need it, but carefully done to ensure that athletics do not receive extra favors

Student Welfare:
- Adhering to 20 hour rule
- Cost of attendance
- Travel time causing missed classes and tests
- Exploitation of student-athletes
- Integration into the larger university community
- Health concerns, especially concussions
- Sexual violence
- Equity of gender, class and race
Once these drafts are written, they will be compiled and sent out to the COIA delegates for feedback. The final document will then be sent to each faculty senate for approval by a vote. The final document will be published on COIA’s website, given to the NCAA and distributed to the press.

My observations and recommendations:

1. The consensus was clear that if the reform of college sports is left up to the courts, there will be “pay for play.” The anti-trust lawyers will be able to make a compelling case of this in courts, as we have already seen in the first NLRB ruling about unionizing the football team at NU.

   Therefore, the best hope to maintain amateur athletics at the collegiate level is through reform, achieved through the collaboration of university presidents, faculties, athletic directors, student-athletes, and the NCAA working together to ensure the student-athlete remains a student first and foremost.

2. Although COIA serves as a valuable source of information and sharing concerns among FBS schools, its future seems unclear and uncertain. If the reorganization happens and COIA incorporates, charges dues and has a paid staff, it has the potential to be the strong, cohesive voice for faculty in the discussion of reforming intercollegiate athletics. If not, it is likely that the ebb and flow of its effectiveness will continue. I recommend we continue our membership in COIA, even if it entails a small membership fee, until we see how these internal changes play out. It has the potential, but it has tried this before and failed. Without an ongoing staff and budget, COIA’s effectiveness will remain limited.

3. It was also the general consensus that COIA members can be most effective when they work collaboratively with the CAB (Collegiate Athletics Board, here at NU that is CAR, the committee on athletics and recreation) and the Faculty Academic Representative (FAR). CAR has mentioned having the COIA representative from the Faculty Senate join them, but this has not happened. I recommend we follow on this and make sure this happens this year, next fall at the latest.

4. COIA also recommends that the COIA representative serve a 5-year term. Since our Faculty Senate terms are only for 3 years, this presents a problem. However, given the extent of information and the learning curve, I do recommend that COIA representatives serve a 3-year term.
In summary:

I recommend that Northwestern University’s Faculty Senate:

1. Maintain its affiliation with COIA, with a wait and see perspective
2. Ensure the COIA representative becomes a standing member of the CAR committee
3. Appoint the COIA representative to serve a 3-year term
4. Use the forthcoming Best Practices document to assess any gaps between the state of athletics at NU and the desired state.

Respectfully submitted,

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